

Written by Jamie Ruby  
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**Exclusive Interview with Chris Heyerdahl of *Stargate Atlantis*, *Sanctuary*, *Hell on Wheels***

***The Twilight Saga***

**Interview by Jamie Ruby**

**Written by Jamie Ruby**



One can see Chris Heyerdahl it seems everywhere these days, even if he's not always recognizable. Heyerdahl has played a variety of characters both in movies and in television, but he almost never looks the same. Some of his more popular roles include his role of Todd the Wraith on Syfy's *Stargate: Atlantis* (where he also played the more recognizable Halling), Marcus in the hugely popular *Twilight* film series, his dual roles on *Sanctuary* as both Biggie (Bigfoot) and John Druitt. More recently Heyerdahl has also joined the cast of AMC's *Hell on Wheels* as the Swede.

Heyerdahl recently sat down with Jamie Ruby of SciFi Vision to talk about a variety of his roles.



***Photo © Rob Daly 2011***

Heyerdahl did not originally expect to become an actor. "I didn't really think of acting professionally as ever really being an option or part of my future. But I was doing a show in high school and there was a professional group that was going to do the same show. They came to see how we were doing ours and how we were doing the technical aspects, changing the scenes, et cetera. And they spoke to myself and one other person in that production and invited us to be a part of the show. And through working with those professionals they said "You're pretty good at this; maybe you should go to school."

" "School? School for what, exactly?" was my response. "You can go to school for this stuff?"

"But it sparked something in me and I decided to take more formal training and moved on from there."

It's the script that Heyerdahl looks to when choosing a role. "I look for a character that resonates with me, you know, it always begins on the page. And with all the characters that I've played,

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the initial text that I was given struck a chord with me and sparked ideas and perhaps made me begin to salivate a little bit and want to explore and taste more of what the character had to offer and the world that he lived in. So it always starts with the writing."

One of the things Heyerdahl finds challenging is when he can't draw from his own experiences for a character. "I suppose the role that's most challenging is the one that is furthest from myself or from my own experiences. It's much harder to piece together a life that you do not have...a starting point [for]. A reference point.

"So those are the hardest, those are the hardest characters. Because you're wanting to create a three-dimensional, living, breathing person with a history, and a present and a future. And if you don't do that, of course, you fail at creating a character that resonates as a real person, someone we can recognize walking down the street. So those are hardest, if they're furthest away from me."



### Heyerdahl as Todd the Wraith on *Stargate: Atlantis* *Photo © MGM Television*

Sometimes researching for his characters can be extremely tough, especially with a character like Todd the Wraith on *Stargate: Atlantis*. "It's tough because I haven't lived 10,000 years, so that's probably the hardest part of that character. The most difficult part about him is that you're trying to bring life experience and our reference is, I don't know, maybe a hundred and ten years I suppose is the oldest person? And I've spoken with someone who is a hundred years old, and I've had fascinating conversations, and certainly someone who's lived a hundred years in the last hundred years, we've literally gone from zero to a thousand, from almost inventing the wheel to the interweb. You know, traveling at light speed, traveling to Mars and all the way from having no automobile to a rocket ship. It's a remarkable time. So speaking with someone like that, that kind of life experience is amazing because this person in particular survived through many wars, saw the advancements of humanity and of course questioned if society itself was advancing as fast as the technology that they were creating and coming up with that philosophical way of looking at life.

"So it's that times 100,000. It's difficult to even comprehend that, for any of us...that kind of thing is daunting to try and think of. But that's the place that he came from.

"So even though here you have a character who is put up as the villain of the piece or that our heroes don't like because of course they're his food source (laughs), he's got ten thousand years to draw upon. And what an amazing person to spend time with.

"And I think that was part of this wonderful relationship that was started with him and with Joe [Flanigan]'s character [John Sheppard]. And how that connection began is, even though they're

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on two completely different sides of the equation there's a certain respect and acknowledgement of who these people are and the way they see the world."

Heyerdahl enjoys the different transformations he gets to undergo as an actor. "As a character actor it's fun to transform. That's something that's always appealed to me, and sometimes it's easier to transform than others. When you have a mask on, a prosthetic mask, it certainly makes it easy. There are two examples, there's Todd and there's Biggie. Todd - if you look, you can see the shape of my face and it follows a bit more of the contours of my face whereas Biggie is pretty much unrecognizable. You'd never know what the person looked like under that mask. So it's two different types of masks. And when you're getting into a more subtle mask, you're just putting on regular makeup and maybe adding a nose or some eyelashes or eyebrows, you know, it's a little more subtle but the same thing can happen.

"So I guess it's two different kinds of approaches to acting. There's the British style of acting, that is maybe more outside in and the American form of acting, which is inside out, and I think I fall somewhere in the middle."

Heyerdahl has played what many people would consider both "good" and "evil" characters; however, he sees it different in his approach. "In all honesty, I don't really look at characters as good or bad. I think that inherently in any of these characters, you're wanting to create a three-dimensional person. And given the parameters of the craft I think most of the time the so-called bad characters are more fun to play because they get to do all the things that we can't do."



### **Heyerdahl as Biggie in *Sanctuary***

**Photo © Chris Helcermanas-Benge/Syfy**

Heyerdahl's dual roles in *Sanctuary* are some of fans favorites. The actor enjoys playing both of the very different roles. "They're both great characters. It really depends on how late my night was before whether I prefer Biggie or not. He gets up awfully early in the morning, old Biggie (laughs). Sometimes that's enjoyable and sometimes it's less [than] that."

Many fans were wondering whether Druitt would be back again on *Sanctuary*. "Well, it's hard to say at this stage of the game but the odds are that he's pretty dead. That being said, it is sci-fi. No one ever dies in sci-fi.

"So it really is completely up to the writers. At this point, as far as Druitt in the future, he is dead as far as I know, but just like Watson (played by Peter Wingfield), we can show stories from different plot time periods, explore different decades in Magnus' life and meet him there."

Heyerdahl works with a lot of green screen and other special effects on the show. "Green

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screen is interesting because it can be used in so many ways. With *Sanctuary*, it comes to an extreme in so many ways because a lot of our environments are 100 percent computer generated. So when you have practical sets around you it makes it much easier because you have a very obvious focal point. But when you are completely surrounded in green and you're reacting to, I don't know, some kind of 10,000-foot serpent or something flying around and coming down to crush you, it's a fine balance between being ridiculous and not wanting to fall all over the floor laughing at how ridiculous it is that adults are sitting there being frightened of something that doesn't exist.

"So, you know, we have to keep a straight face and a lot of times we succeed and sometimes we fail, but it becomes very technical in those kinds of situations. But other times you don't even realize it because it may be the floor that is eventually being changed and how often are you staring at the floor? Or it may be something behind you that is, the set is continuing behind you or the hallway is continuing but it doesn't change the situation at hand, which is acting with and reacting to your fellows. So sometimes it's difficult and other times you don't even realize you're in a green screen."

The actor's favorite part about working on the series is the cast. "I think anytime you're working anywhere, you're playing anywhere, you want to have people who enjoy the game and the sandbox. That's definitely something that happened there, and the people who are invited in to play, same thing. I think everyone is nervous, like the first day of school, nervous when they first walk on the set of *Sanctuary*."



**Heyerdahl as John Druitt**  
**Photo © Joe Pugliese/Syfy**

"I guess I think of when we were welcoming Rob Lawrence Lawrenson (who plays Declan) and it was his first gig in Canada, I think. And he and his family had just moved to Canada. He came on set, and he was a bit nervous; he a lot to do and big shoes to fill, et cetera. And I think he was taking it a bit seriously and he wanted to do a good job, like everyone."

"Anyway there was a scene where he is introduced to Druitt, and/or he says hello to Druitt, he'd probably met him before, I can't remember. We do the scene a couple of times; it's fine. But I go over to makeup and I ask Francesca, "Can you get me some hand cream?" And so she slathers a little bit of hand cream onto my hand and I said "No, more more more more more." And so she puts about a quarter of this tub of hand cream into my hand."

"And so I just palm it, put it behind my back, we start the scene again. And it goes around, he says hello, and I go over to shake his hand and it's a close up on him and of course I shake his

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hand. You really had to wonder what Druitt's been doing a few minutes before.

"It set the bar so that he knew from that moment on that it wasn't really ever a serious set.

"...There's something about a set like that...they make a great team, because you have Amanda [Tapping], who's a gorgeous leading lady, and Robin [Dunne]...and they don't take themselves seriously. And that's an extremely rare combination. And because of that it filters down and makes for a very playful, light, easygoing set."

The atmosphere on one of Heyerdahl's other recent projects, *Hell on Wheels*, is more serious. "You're outside for most of it, so technically it's more difficult than a show like

*Sanctuary*

...as far as dealing with time. Time is not really on our side when you're shooting outside. So you need to be much more focused in many ways.

"But also the time, the situation doesn't really lend itself to a lot of goofing off. It was fun and we certainly had a good time doing it, we had a lot of laughs. But it's a much different format than *Sanctuary*

"I think *Sanctuary* is one of those rare things, I think you have to have Robin Dunne on a set in order to have the full, hundred percent goof. He's a lot of fun and he was really, as Number Two he took the role of court jester to a completely different level. He's one of those great leading men that doesn't mind making a fool of himself and so that makes for a lot of fun."

Heyerdahl's story of getting his role on *Hell on Wheels* is unique. "I had a buddy of mine who called me up on a Sunday night - he's a friend of mine who was auditioning for a show called *Hell on Wheels*

and he was auditioning for a character called "The Swede," and he said, "I keep reading this and he's an amazing character but I can't stop thinking about you each time I read these words." And so he called me up and said, "Are you going to go in and audition for this?"

"There's a friend, there's a rare thing, where an actor calls up another and tells him about something. And the next day I was offered an audition. It all happened in a few hours and I went in and threw it down on tape, and a couple of days later was asked to come in for a callback, and went in with a number of other people and within a few hours I had the job. It all happened quite quickly."



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## Heyerdahl as The Swedish *Hell on Wheels* Photo © Chris Large/AMC

AMC has recently had good success with its original series, with shows like *The Walking Dead* and *Mad Men*.

"I think inherently it's exciting to know you're working with a group of people who have a certain pedigree. And we all have to trust that we've been chosen to be a part of that family for a reason, for a good reason. It's not really pressure you have, it's an opportunity to work with excellent writers and excellent actors and directors. The directors were banging down the doors to try and direct one of these episodes. So you're working with the best and that's always fun and a great challenge. So there's only a positive spin on that one."

Heyerdahl's character has an interesting background and even more interesting scenes. "He was a prisoner of war in Andersonville, which was one of the more notorious prisons in the South during that period. And I think that he probably had to resort to a bit of, um, well, let's just say after seeing him stab Toole with a fork, it's probably not the first time he's stabbed an Irishman with a fork. He might have developed a certain taste for Irish flesh, you never know."

[The writers and directors] are fairly strict with the script on a show like *Hell on Wheels*. "They're pretty strict with the script, but there's always room for a little bit of improvisation. It's not really something that's necessary with a script like this. These are some of the best writers out there and they've thought about every word. The thing is that they're there on set so if something doesn't feel right in the mouth, they're right there. Joe [Gayton] and Tony [Gayton] were there every day, David Von Ancken was there every day, Shiban was there. You know, they're easy access. These guys were not far off, down in Hollywood, sitting behind a desk having five people to go through to talk to them. They were there on set getting dirty and wet and cold with us. It made it so much easier if you had questions about something, they were there to answer the questions."

Heyerdahl got to work closely with John Shiban, who is one of the executive producers on the series, and has also written for the show, "I've never worked with him before but he was there pretty much all the time from the beginning of the shoot through the very last day. He's a wonderful man to work with."

One of Heyerdahl's film roles include that of Marcus, who appeared in *The Twilight Saga* films *New Moon* and

*Breaking Dawn - Part 1*

, and will reprise the role in the final installment

*Breaking Dawn - Part 2*

. "Chris Weitz (director of *New Moon*

) asked if I would be interested in playing Marcus and I said yes and that was about the extent of it."

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"...I knew about the character because my nieces and a number of my godchildren had read the books and were very passionate about them. So I had a previous knowledge of the characters and the phenomenon and how passionate they were about them. And I'd seen the first film. So I went in knowing what it was, so it was quite easy to say yes to."

The actor enjoyed the role. "I love vampires, absolutely. Playing a vampire is always enticing."

Obviously there is a huge fanbase associated with the films (and books they are based on), and the actor was there for it. "I witnessed it; by association I witnessed a lot of the craziness. But really in day to day, there are a few obvious people who have to deal with that on a daily basis. Really the interest is more in them than most of the secondary players or certainly tertiary players.

"But it's an amazing thing to witness because there is such a passion around the stories, the books and now films. So there was, it's a wonderful thing to see, just great to see any literary phenomenon be brought to fruition in film. You get to see how well they did in creating these characters that you've already created in your imagination, and that creates heat of passion."



**Heyerdahl as Marcus in *New Moon***  
**Photo © Summit Entertainment**

The Volturi will be back in a larger capacity in the final film. "Marcus inherently is pretty much the silent partner. He never says anything unless he really has something to say. So his presence is just as strong as it is in the books and so, given the fact that we have the big showdown at the end of the series, he's there along with the rest of the Volturi and the witnesses, and we have the high noon showdown. So he's definitely in it much more just as he is in the books."

For the time being, Heyerdahl is focused on his acting, but he hasn't ruled out working behind the camera. "Right now it doesn't interest me but it may very well interest me in the future."

The actor, however, has thought about a series he'd like to guest star in in the future. "I'd like to work with John Noble [from *Fringe*.] I love his character on that show. I think he's absolutely amazing."

Heyerdahl doesn't think much about what his roles may be in the future, though he does have some projects in the works. "Right now I'm playing or have just recently finished playing such a juicy character that I just look forward to playing him again. So we'll see, there are a couple of things that are in the fire right now that will come up in the new year. And hopefully they'll come

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to fruition because there are a couple of really wonderful characters that I'm not at liberty to name, but they look like a lot of fun.

"But iconic characters, really I just look forward to playing a character that's three-dimensional and interesting and has a history and conflict and a sense of humor and trying to explore those things in every character that I play."